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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 006061

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TAGS: PREL LE SY IS FR
SUBJECT: FRENCH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEBATE ON UNIFIL

REF: PARIS 5811

¶1. (U) Summary: On Sept. 7, the French National Assembly debated France's participation in a reinforced UNIFIL. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin hailed the lifting of the Israeli blockade of Lebanon, noted the despatch of a French interministerial team to assess reconstruction efforts, and called upon Iran to take responsibility for its nuclear activities. He stressed that Iran's response to the international community's offer was unsatisfactory, adding that the impasse could only be solved through political means. The PM underscored Pres. Chirac's call for a new meeting of the Quartet, and (in a clear reference to USG policy) said that war was not the proper response to terrorism. Among the representatives of the four major parties who responded afterwards, Francois Bayrou of the centrist UDF argued that UNIFIL's mandate was too fuzzy, and that the Government of Lebanon's reticence to forcibly disarm Hizballah would produce a "UNIFIL II" just as ineffective as its predecessor. Several speakers took the opportunity to argue for holding the line against cuts in the defense budget. End summary.

PM Villepin Calls upon Syria and Iran to Comply with UNSCRs

¶2. (U) Embassy Poloffs and Pol FSN attended the September 7 debate in the French National Assembly over France's participation in UNIFIL, in a special session called at the behest of President Chirac. PM Dominique de Villepin opened the proceedings by delivering the government's statement, in which he described an arc of crisis stretching from Somalia to Afghanistan, with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict at its heart. He underscored President Chirac's August 28 call for a new Quartet meeting (see Paris 5811), noting that now more than ever, the Israelis and Palestinians are incapable of reaching a solution by themselves. Suggesting that "France knows better than anyone" the importance of the cultural and religious motivations that sustain the region's crises, Villepin implicitly criticized the USG for disregarding Pres. Chirac's counsel on Iraq. As a result, Iraq has become "a new home of crisis that destabilizes the region and

nourishes terrorism." He also took aim at the Global War on Terror, saying that the use of military means was not the answer to terrorism. (Note: Reuters reported these remarks under the headline "Villepin disputes the American strategy for the Near East.")

¶13. (U) Returning to his main theme, Villepin reviewed France's response to the Lebanon crisis. He hailed the lifting of the Israeli blockade of Lebanon (scheduled for later that afternoon) and announced the despatch to Beirut of an interministerial French team to evaluate reconstruction efforts. He praised PM Siniora's "courage and spirit of responsibility" for deploying the Lebanese Armed Forces to the south of the country for the first time in forty years, while noting that French-Israeli relations remain "solid and confident" and that Paris and Tel Aviv maintain a "constructive dialogue." Turning to Hizballah's backers, he called upon Syria to fully comply with UNSCRs 1559, 1595 and 1701. With respect to Iran's nuclear ambitions, he called on Iran to assume its responsibilities, reiterated that Iran's response to the international community's offer was unsatisfactory, and stressed that there is no solution other than a political one to the current impasse. He concluded by noting that it was the National Assembly's approval of the government's military law (which set out the military budget until 2008) that permitted France, and Europe, to play an important role on the international stage. "This is an area in which we have made real progress in these last few years: Lebanon demonstrates it. But we still have further to go," Villepin said.

The Parties Chime In

¶14. (U) Though largely pro forma (there was no vote at stake), the ensuing debate allowed representatives of four major parties to stake out their positions. Francois Bayrou of the centrist UDF party, though largely supportive of the French deployment, chided the government for accepting a UNIFIL mandate encased in language that was too "vague, diplomatic and fuzzy." Noting the huge risks to UNIFIL, Lebanon and Israel if Hizballah did not disarm, Bayrou worried that the Government of Lebanon's reticence to use force against Hizballah would ultimately render the reinforced UNIFIL as ineffective as its predecessor. In contrast to Bayrou, who spoke at length about Israel's right to exist and lambasted (with much applause) FM Douste-Blazy for referring to Iran as a source of regional stability, Communist Party representative Marie-George Buffet tried to lay the blame for the recent Lebanon conflict at Israel's door. She criticized UNSCR 1701 for lacking, among other things, any reference to the plight of the Palestinians and advocated only using political means to pursue the disarmament of Hizballah.

¶15. (U) Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) member Bernard Accoyer joined Bayrou and Villepin in arguing for a strong defense budget. He praised the government's handling of the Lebanon crisis, and lauded President Chirac's role in securing a ceasefire. Jean-Marc Ayrault, leader of the Assembly's socialist bloc, rounded out the session by deeming the government's proposal for an international conference on the Near East "premature and unrealistic."

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